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THE POSITIVE ELEMENT IN THE CORRECTION OF WRITTEN WORK

Correcting and grading papers is the bane of the existence of most teachers. The large stack of papers to be graded is looked upon as a necessary evil and the only consolation that the poor teacher gets out of the work is the thought that every worthwhile thing has its unattractive side. He puts a positive emphasis on teaching because he enjoys the work and is interested in it, but he corrects his papers only because he has to. He corrects and grades with the feeling that if he does not perform this duty, something will go wrong — the student will want to know “what he got,” the parent will want to know how his boy is progressing in his work, and the principal will want to know what the standing of the pupil is. The teacher has a subconscious feeling that if he is not able to answer these questions there will be some unpleasantness in store for him. His feeling is a negative one, is what will happen if he does not, and not what will happen if he does.

The conscientious teacher, however, masters his feelings and works patiently through the mass of papers to be corrected, marking mistake after mistake. (Again the negative element, for he marks what the student has wrong, not what he has right). When he gets through with the paper, what a horrid-looking thing it is! Literally covered with red or blue marks! A keen disappointment to the teacher who has labored so hard to bring his boys and girls up to a worthwhile standard! It will also probably be a disappointment and possible discouragement to some ambitious but slow-witted student. But the teacher is sustained by the hope that the red and blue marks will bring vividly before the student's mind the error of his ways and cause him immediately to reform. And finally, the catastrophe of this little tragedy occurs when the paper is handed to the student, he glances at the grade on the sheet, and throws the paper into the waste paper basket. The teacher probably asks himself, “What's the use?” If he should try to answer this he would have to say the student, the parents, and the record would want to know what the student got on the paper.

It seems to me that the whole trouble with this method of grading lies in the fact that it is a negative and not a positive method. The question should be not what would happen if the paper is not graded, but what positive good can be done by grading it. What should grading accomplish? The teacher who asks himself that question and thinks sincerely upon it will come to some conclusions as to what it will accomplish. After he has reached these conclusions he will soon devise methods to accomplish them.

In the first place, the correcting and grading of papers should contribute toward putting the student in the right mental attitude toward his work. A disgruntled student does poor work. A student who feels that he has gotten an unjust grade on his paper will do poorer work because of it. We underestimate the student's mentality when we think that he does not recognize poor or slack grading on our part. The teacher should sincerely strive to acquire as just methods as possible for estimating the grades of his students, and strive to make them feel the justness of these methods. Absolute frankness between teacher and student in regard to grades seems to me to be one of the best ways of creating this feeling. The student should be definitely encouraged to inquire frequently about his standing. This gives the teacher the opportunity of telling him in what respects he is doing well in his work and in what respects he needs to strengthen himself. No doubt the sole motive of the student in inquiring is a desire to know what reward he is getting for his work, but his inquiry results in his not only ascertaining this fact but, in case his standing is low, it may result in causing him to make a renewed effort to improve his work, it will show him where his weaknesses are, and will convince him that the teacher is dealing openly, frankly and justly with him with the sole intention of bettering him individually.

We have all heard students remark, "What's the use of working, you don't get what you make anyhow." Even if we deduct a large per cent. from the value of such a statement, because of the ignorance of standards and because of personal pique on the part of the student, such remarks are very often justified by slack methods of grading on the part of the teacher. If the student reacts thus in a negative way to the feeling of injustice, would it

be unreasonable to expect him to react in a positive way to the belief that the teacher is making every effort to give him justice and a square deal?

In the second place, the grading of papers should be pedagogical. That sounds like a foolish statement and there ought not to be any necessity for making such a statement. But the average teacher spends a great deal of time studying the pedagogy of the classroom, but forgets it immediately that he begins grading papers. What is the purpose of marking the mistakes on a paper with red ink or blue pencil? So that the student might see his mistakes and not make them again. But does he see his mistakes? No, he sees his grade and throws the paper away, unless the present movement for conservation causes him to carry it home for scratch-paper. If he does not look at his mistakes, and nine-tenths of our students do not, then all that labor and ink have gone to waste, and the whole proceeding is therefore unpedagogical. Is it natural to expect a student of the high school age, "busy" as he is, to look through a whole paper? Each mistake should be brought to his attention, preferably soon after it is made, and he be required to correct this. If he has had home-work to do, he can correct his own work as the teacher or some other pupil reads the correct form. I have found one of the best methods for accomplishing this is to have the class lay aside the papers with home-work, and rewrite from the board the exercise, the teacher going from desk to desk and correcting the sentences as they are written. When all the sentences have been corrected, the grade can be given. The work is done, the pupil has seen his mistakes, and the teacher has no papers to carry home. This plan is especially feasible for a test. The writer rarely has a test paper to grade after the hour in which the test is given. When the pupils are through with the first question he starts at one side of the room, and goes from desk to desk correcting them. By the time he gets to the other side of the room the pupil with whom he started has probably number two and three done and the teacher starts over again. The pupils like this method, for they see what progress they are making in the test.

But at best the marking of mistakes is a negative method. Good pedagogy requires that we emphasize the correct form and not the incorrect form. So the writer has devised a system of

credits for what is correct and ignores the mistakes. If the exercise is to supply words for blanks he gives one credit for every word correctly supplied and of course gives no credit for wrong words. When through, the student himself is allowed to add his credits, multiply by one hundred and divide by the total number of credits in the exercise and get his own grade. If it is an English-German exercise, one credit is given to every word and the grade based upon the total number of words in the exercise. If it is a test, each question gets the same number of credits as the definite number of things that the teacher wants told in the question. For instance, if the question is, "What verbs take *sein* to form the perfect tense", there would be one credit for "intransitive", one for "motion", and one for "change of condition". If the exceptions were wanted, one credit would be given for each exception. The questions are generally written on the board with the credit-value opposite each question, the total number of credits at the bottom. The teacher goes from seat to seat as the students write and gives each question its value by credits. When the student is through, he adds up his own credits, multiplies by one hundred, divides by the total number of credits and has his grade.

The writer sincerely believes that this positive, accurate method of grading both home-work and tests has given his students the feeling that they will get everything that is due them and nothing that is not, thus giving them a definite goal to work for; also that it has greatly improved their work by emphasizing the correct forms rather than the incorrect.

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